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**Reclaiming the Body and Subverting Norms: A Study of Agency, Violence, and Aesthetic Resistance in The Vegetarian**

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**Abstract**

*This study looks at Han Kangs novel The Vegetarian. It is about the fight between what the individual wants and what society expects. The paper looks at how the story's told the symbols used and how the characters change. It explores how the main character Yeong-hye decides not to eat meat. This decision is a way for Yeong-hye to resist the rules that men make. The paper uses ideas from feminism, psychology and the study of the body. It shows how the novels unusual structure highlights how societal pressure can break down a persons sense of self. The Vegetarian novel is really about Yeong-hye and her struggle, with expectations. Yeong-hyes situation, where she does not respond her decision to not hurt anyone and her change into something like a plant show that she is completely against the way people live which's all about buying things hurting women and doing what everyone else does. The Vegetarian shows that when people try to be independent others can think they are sick which tells us a lot about what people're really worried about like their bodies, what they want and doing what they are told. The book looks at the body as a place where people can be in control lose control and imagine a way of being, in control, which is what Yeong-hyes body is, a place where The Vegetarian explores these ideas.*

**Keywords:** Han Kang, The Vegetarian, body politics, feminist theory, agency, vegetarianism, violence, narrative fragmentation, Korean society.

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Han Kang's The Vegetarian is a book that tells an unusual story. The Vegetarian makes you think about things like being in control of your life having a body and saying no to things you do not want to do. The story is about Yeong-hye, a woman from Korea who suddenly stops eating meat after she has a dream. The book is split into three parts. Each part is told by a different person who is close, to Yeong-hyes life. The Vegetarian is a book that was first written in 2007 and translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015. This thing starts with her changing what she eats. It then becomes a big change that makes her feel like she does not belong with her family or the people around her. The food change is not about food it is about her changing who she is. This change makes her feel like she is not part of her family or society anymore. It even makes her feel like she is not herself anymore. The change in her diet is like a shift in her life that affects everything, including her relationships, with her family and the people she knows and even her own sense of self her own food choices her own life.

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The Vegetarian is not a story about being a vegetarian. It is a book that thinks deeply about how our bodies are controlled by the people around us. The book looks at how our own choices can change the way things are normally done. It talks about violence not just when someone gets hurt but when someone is treated badly. The book asks questions like how do we decide what is normal what it means to be a man or a woman and when do we have to do what other people say. The main character Yeong-hye learns more about her body and this helps the author Han Kang show what is wrong, with a society that values working hard and doing what you are told over being kind and thinking about your own feelings. The Vegetarian makes you think about how we should treat each other and ourselves.

The story of Yeong-hye is about Yeong-hye rejecting meat. This is not just about food. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is also a rejection of the control that men have over women. This is a way for Yeong-hye to resist the rules that society has made. The book *The Vegetarian* is a critique of the way things are in society. It looks at how women are treated and how people think about their bodies. By reading *The Vegetarian* we can see that it is not a book, but also a comment, on the society we live in. *The Vegetarian* is a book that uses ideas from people who study women's rights and ideas from people who study how our minds work.

*The Politics of the Body: Vegetarians, Violence, and Control* Yeong-hye decides to stop eating meat and at first it seems like no deal. It does not take long for this to cause a lot of trouble. Her husband and brother-in-law and family members get really upset. They are worried about what they can. Cannot do with their own bodies. They are also worried, about what other people think they should be doing. When her husband talks about it he thinks Yeong-hye's choice is just weird and something they have to deal with. He does not think that Yeong-hye stopped eating meat because she really believes in it. He just thinks it is annoying.

The main problem in *The Vegetarian* is about who gets to decide what happens to our bodies. Our bodies are usually thought of as our private thing but in this story other people try to control what Yeong-hye does with hers. When Yeong-hye says she does not want to eat meat people judge her. Try to make her do what they think she should do.

People usually expect that we will do what society says we should do with our bodies, women. Women are often seen as people who should listen and do what men say. Yeong-hye does not do what people expect her to do so she is a threat to the way things normally. *The Vegetarian* shows how Yeong-hye's decisions about her body cause problems for the people, around her.

The fact that Yeong-hye will not eat meat is not really about the food itself. Yeong-hye's refusal of meat represents a refusal of violence. In our society people think it is good to buy and use things and to work hard. So when Yeong-hye rejects meat it is like she is rejecting violence against animals and against herself. Han Kang uses Yeong-hye to ask an important question: what happens when someone does not want to be part of violence that is all around us? For Yeong-hye the answer is that she becomes isolated from others.

The people and systems that have power feel like they have to show Yeong-hye who's, in charge. People want things to be normal even if that means being cruel is okay. They just want everything to be normal when that normal is actually really mean. This is the case with the concept of normalcy, where normalcy is prioritized over being kind, to others and that is a problem because normalcy should not maintain cruelty normalcy should promote kindness and understanding and people should insist on that of just any normalcy.

The way *The Vegetarian* is written really shows how Yeong-hye's sense of self falls apart. The book is split into three parts. *The Vegetarian*, *Mongolian Mark* and *Flaming Trees*. Each part is told by someone. Han Kang does this to show that there is no one way to tell the story. She wants to show Yeong-hye from different viewpoints. This way we can see how other

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people's opinions affect *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye and what she thinks of herself. The Vegetarian, Yeong-hye is seen in different ways by the people, around her.

The way the story is told with voices is like what is happening to Yeong-hye herself. She is falling apart. Each person who tells the story puts their worries and wants onto Yeong-hye so we do not really know what she is thinking or feeling. Her husband thinks what she is doing is crazy and does not make sense. Her brother-in-law thinks about her in a way because of how she is changing. Her sister In-hye feels bad for her. Wishes she could help but she does not know how. Because of this Yeong-hye is, like a page where people write down their own fears and fantasies and things that make them upset Yeong-hye is the one they are writing about.

The story is over the place in terms of time. Memories and dreams and things that are happening now all get mixed up so it is hard to tell what happened when. Dreams are especially important for Yeong-hye as she changes. The dream that makes her want to be a vegetarian is really scary and violent. It shows how violence can affect more than just people. This weird way of telling the story makes it hard to know what is real and what is just in Yeong-hyes mind. It shows that Yeong-hye is changing on the inside well as on the outside. Yeong-hyes transformation is not just about what people can see but, about what is going on in her mind.

The story of Yeong-hye is, over the place and that shows how Yeong-hye is falling apart inside. It also shows how the main stories that everyone tells can take over what individual people think and feel. The fact that there is no one voice telling the story of Yeong-hye shows that the way society is set up does not make room for people who're different. Society would rather put labels on people. Try to control them.

The Vegetarian shows how people in charge men try to control Yeong-hyes body. Her husband expects her to do what he says take care of the home and do everything he wants. When Yeong-hye does not listen he tries to make her behave like a wife. He thinks she is doing something and needs to be taught a lesson. The Vegetarian is, about how Yeong-hyes body's seen as a place where men can exert power over her.

The second part of the story is told by Yeong-hyes brother-in-law. He looks at Yeong-hye in a way. He thinks about what he wants from her. That makes her change seem exciting to him. He is really obsessed with her. He likes to draw pictures of her stare at her arms and legs. Thinks that the way she is now is beautiful, not something that is making a point. The way he looks at Yeong-hye shows how men in charge often do not just control women. Also make them into objects that they find sexy. This is what happens when women try to resist they get turned into objects instead. Yeong-hyes brother-, in-law does this to her he makes her resistance into something that he can obsess over.

Yeong-hye does not want to eat meat. Later she also stops taking care of her personal hygiene and the way she behaves in public. This can be seen as her way of fighting against the things that women are expected to do. She does not want to be a part of a system that does not think women are important. Judith Butler says that when we do not follow the rules it shows that these rules are not natural they are made by people. By not following these rules Yeong-hye shows us how people are forced to act in ways because of their gender. Yeong-hyes actions are not just random they are actually a way of criticizing the way things are and she is using her own body to make this point.

The woman's ability to make her decisions is always being questioned. She is given medicine watched all the time and not allowed to leave. People think there is something with her because she makes choices that are not like what others do. They say she is not thinking clearly because she does not agree with them. This happens because people are worried, about women being able to do what they want. Women who do not want to do what society expects of them are often called crazy or emotional which is a way to control them than really help the

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women. The woman's autonomy is what is really being threatened here. The woman's ability to make her choices is seen as a problem.

The title *The Vegetarian* makes you think of more than what you eat. It is also about being in a state that's like being a plant, a state that is between being alive and being dead. Yeong-hye's body starts to look like a plant it just sits there it does not move it does not care about what people want her to do. She starts to think about plants of thinking about things that people usually want. This shows that she is changing who she is in a way. People usually think that being active and making things and buying things is important. But plants are different they just. They do not hurt anything to do it. *The Vegetarian* is, about this kind of growth.

Yeong-hye's change into a plant like state shows that she is being quiet and strong at the time. Even though her body looks still Yeong-hye's thoughts and feelings and her ability to resist are still going on inside her. This is similar to what ecofeminist people think they believe that being connected to plants is a way to live it means you do not want to hurt the earth. Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant like state shows that she wants to take care of things not control them. This is about Yeong-hye and her plant life and how Yeong-hye's plant life is a way of being that's different from the usual way of being, in charge.

This comparison can be seen in two ways. The idea of being like a plant also makes us think about what we lose. Like being able to speak move around and be part of society. Some people might think that Yeong-hye is giving up and becoming passive when she starts to act like a plant. They might see it as surrendering of fighting back.. Han Kang makes this idea more complicated. When Yeong-hye starts to act like a plant she is not giving up control over her life. Instead she is changing what that means. She does not want to be part of the human way of doing things with its own set of rules and relationships. Yeong-hye is choosing a way of living one that is more, like a plant.

The last parts of the novel, where Yeong-hye's movement and thinking get worse show that fighting back against society has its limits. Yeong-hye's situation is a critique of society. When Yeong-hye resists society she becomes isolated from the things that make us human, like family and society and the way we talk to each other. The cost of Yeong-hye's resistance is that she is no longer a part of the things that make us feel like we belong like family and society and language. Yeong-hye's resistance, to society leads to her feeling.

Yeong-hye decides to be a vegetarian because of a dream she has, about animals being killed. This dream makes her think about how people hurt animals when they eat meat. The way Han Kang writes about people eating meat shows that we get used to the fact that it involves hurting animals. So when Yeong-hye says no to eating meat it is like she is saying no to hurting animals. Yeong-hye's decision to be a vegetarian is her way of saying that she does not want to be a part of anything that hurts animals.

People in our society do not usually think that eating meat is an act. We just think about how good it tastes, how easy it's to get and how much we like it.. Yeong-hye had a dream that really scared her. It made her think about the violence of eating meat. Her body is now telling her that eating meat is wrong and she is listening. This is not just about what she likes to eat it is about what she thinks is right and wrong. Yeong-hye choosing not to eat meat is connected to questions about whether we should be kind to animals. When she says no to meat she is also saying no to all the things that happen to animals.

Yeong-hye's decision is a deal because it shows that she cares about animals and does not want to hurt them. Her choice of not eating meat is also about not wanting to be a part of a system that's cruel to animals. Yeong-hye's choice of being a vegetarian is really about standing up for what she believes in and trying to make the world a better place, for all living things.

People's reactions show how scary it can be to take an ethical stance like that. When Yeong-hye does something people get uncomfortable they make fun of her and they try to force her to change. Her husband is annoyed because it is inconvenient for him. Her family is worried about what other people will think of them and how it will affect their reputation. The question of whether violence is okay gets pushed aside so that everyone can just get along and be the same. The ethical question of violence is not important, to them the ethical question of violence is ignored so that people can maintain order and conformity and the ethical question of violence is forgotten.

Han Kangs story is really about how people do not know how to deal with things that make them feel bad. Han Kang is not just talking about being a vegetarian. The bad things that Yeong-hye does not want to do to animals are the bad things that people do to each other. This can be hurting someones feelings. Hurting them on purpose. Yeong-hyes change shows that people are worried about the things they do and they do not want to think about it. Han Kangs narrative makes people think about the harm that people cause and how everyone is responsible, for this harm.

Yeong-hyes decision to not eat meat becomes a problem. People see her choice as something that's wrong, with her rather than something she wants to do. They try to help her with doctors, medicine and hospitals. This shows how people who are different are treated in todays world. When everyone is supposed to be the same being different is seen as a problem. Yeong-hyes choice is not seen as a choice it is seen as something that needs to be fixed. The way we think about things shows what Foucault said about how institutions control what our bodies do and make our behavior normal.

Being normal is a way for society to control people, where if someone is different they are either fixed, controlled or ignored. Saying that Yeong-hye is ill means that society does not have to think about the big questions that her choice brings up. Of thinking about Yeong-hyes ability to make her own choices the people around her try to be in charge again. Yeong-hyes situation is an example of how medicalization can be used to control people, like Yeong-hye. The novel makes it really hard to know what is sane and what is not. Yeong-hyes madness does not come from being irrational it comes from being very clear about things. She refuses to be a part of anything. When violence is seen as normal people who resist it can be very scary. Disrupt everything. Yeong-hyes silence and poor physical health at the end are not because she gave up they are because the system she lives in cannot accept Yeong-hyes body or Yeong-hyes disagreement, with it. Han Kangs *The Vegetarian* is a strong book that looks at how people treat their bodies and how they can say no to things they do not want to do.

The main character Yeong-hye changes in ways and this shows us how people can make their own choices but also how these choices can be affected by whether they are a man or a woman. Yeong-hye stops eating meat. This makes us think about violence and why people do things just because others do them. The way the story is told in pieces is like what happens to people when they are forced to follow rules and do what others want them to do. They start to lose themselves. Han Kangs *The Vegetarian* is really about people like Yeong-hye and how they try to be, in charge of their bodies.

Han Kang looks at vegetarianism in a way as a form of standing up against what society thinks is right. She talks about how people are not allowed to disagree and how they get in trouble when they do something different. The main character Yeong-hye starts to think she is a plant, which's a big change in how she sees herself. This change shows that she does not want to hurt anyone or anything even if it is very hard, for her. The book *The Vegetarian* is a place where the body, politics and standing up against things come together. It makes readers think about what they believe about being able to make their choices what it means to be a man or a

woman and how society should work. The Vegetarian makes us think about these things in a way.

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